

Language Writing Classes

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Writing journals have been used in the second language writing classroom for decades. Most studies looking at the effect of journal writing have focused on written performance, fluency, attitude, and anxiety. However, there have been a few studies focusing on the effect of journal writing on motivation. These studies have shown that students' motivation to write increases after participating in journal writing activities. The pleasure of the activity seems to be a common theme throughout the studies, which suggests that writing journals are not only effective tools for promoting fluency, written performance, and lowering writing apprehension and anxiety, but that they can also help motivate students. In this paper, I discuss what characterizes journal writing focusing on three common types of journaling used in the second language writing classroom. Different perspectives on motivation and its relation to second and foreign language learning are considered. Several studies on the effect of journal writing on student motivation are reviewed, and areas for further research are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

In many L2 writing classrooms, students usually encounter form-focused writing activities that place a lot of emphasis on correct grammar usage. Students usually receive feedback regarding linguistic accuracy as well as content. As a result, many students feel a lot of pressure to perform well, so they experience high levels of anxiety around writing (Min & Kim, 2005; Salem, 2007). This may be why writing classes are usually not listed among learners' favorite language classes, nor are they considered enjoyable when compared to other classes like oral communication. This is unfortunate because students, especially those studying in academia need writing skills, and their tendency to avoid writing classes prevents many students from attaining high levels of writing proficiency.

Moreover, academic writing is also quite regimented, and the attention to form can discourage students from engaging in writing activities over an extended period of time. Writing becomes a chore for students, rather than a fun activity, and many students only write when they are enrolled in a writing class, and do not endeavor to practice writing outside of those classes.

In contrast, assigning writing journals gives students a chance to experience writing from a new perspective. Writing journals also allow students to write on a

regular basis without it feeling like an obligation. Furthermore, because they usually write about topics of interest, students are more motivated and the task ceases to be arduous and becomes pleasurable. In this way, writing journals offer students a respite from the difficult and less enjoyable tasks characteristic of most writing classes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing journals have been defined in a number of different ways in the literature. They have been described as extensive writing (Sun, 2010), a form of free writing (Pervin, 2013), or a communicative activity or technique (Salem, 2007; Walter-Echols, 2008). However, the most comprehensive definition of the writing journal as it is used in the L2 classroom is the one provided by Casanave (2011) in her book *Journal Writing in Second Language Education*, in which she states that journal writing is a “risk-free, personal, reflective, and responsive writing activity done regularly over time in a style that suits the writer’s personality and proficiency level” (p. 5). From my experience, this definition best describes the spirit of the journal writing activity in its many forms, and it is the definition I will use for the purpose of this discussion.

Three common types of journal writing

In the literature, there appear to be three different types of journal writing: pen and paper journals, blogging, and dialogue journals. The pen and paper journals involve students using a notebook in which they write entries on a regular basis. These could be written once or twice a week, or in some situations, daily. In most cases, students choose the topics, and the entries are not corrected by the teacher or their peers because the purpose of the journal is fluency practice. Any feedback the students receive would be in the form of a discussion or comment on the writer’s idea. Generally, the pen and paper type of journal is usually shared between the student and the teacher. The teacher reads the entries, and comments on the writer’s ideas (Hirose & Sasaki, 2000; Pervin, 2013; Salem, 2007).

Another type of journal writing is the web log or blog. This can take the form of a class blog or individual blogs to which the teacher and the class have access. Like the pen and paper journal, the students write about topics of interest. The writing is informal and relaxed, and there is no corrective feedback from the teacher or the peers. In their comparative study of the effects of blogging on students’ writing skills and their perspectives of writing, Li, Lin, Hung, and Huang (2014) used a Teacher-Student blog provided by the university. The students were encouraged to write daily entries about their activities or comment on social issues. They were not encouraged to give feedback on any of their peers’ entries, and neither was the teacher.

In addition to blogging, dialogue journals are also popular forms of journaling. In dialogue journaling, the teacher responds to the writer’s entries, which form an extended dialogue between the writer and the teacher. In their study involving 41 Taiwanese first-year senior high school students, Liao and Wong (2010) had students write two types of weekly entries in their journals: 1) a free topic, and 2) a response to a specific reading that was accompanied with a follow-up

question from the teachers. To promote a sense of community, teachers responded to students' journal entries in class. In another study conducted at a Korean senior high school, 37 eleventh grade girls kept dialogue journals over the course of ten weeks. They wrote entries about topics of interest, and were instructed to write a minimum of five sentences per entry. They submitted their journals to their teacher at the beginning of the week, and at the end of the week, the journals were returned to them with the teacher's responses. The responses were on the content of the entries and unless an error impeded understanding, there was no corrective feedback from the teacher (Min & Kim, 2005).

Although there are variations among the different types of journals, all three of the forms that journaling tends to take in the classroom focus on fluency, and building a sense of community between teachers and students as well as among students and their peers. Writing journals provide the students with an authentic audience in the form of their teacher and peers. Corrective feedback is rarely given, and students are encouraged to take risks and explore their creative side in their journaling activities. In addition, students have increased opportunities to write, which helps improve their writing performance thereby bringing them closer to attaining their goals of proficiency in the target language (Hirose & Sasaki, 2000; Pervin, 2013; Salem, 2007; Min & Kim, 2005; Liao & Wong, 2010; Li et al., 2014). These features make journals a great tool for motivating students to write in English more readily.

Motivation and foreign and second language learning

To understand how the effects of journaling on students could positively affect student motivation, it is important to have a clear understanding of what is meant by motivation. Approaches to and conceptualizations of motivation in L2 learning have their origins in social psychological studies of motivation. In his overview of the many L2 learner motivation studies conducted in the 1970's, 1980's and 1990's, Dornyei (1998) explains the various theories and models of motivation to learn a second or foreign language. Throughout the discussion, it is clear that the idea of motivation is a complex and multifaceted one that cannot be simplified, which makes it difficult to describe and analyze what motivates learners and to identify the factors that lead to lifelong learning.

Although the concept of motivation in L2 learning is complicated, it is clear that motivation refers to the impetus of human behavior, specifically, learning behavior. In other words, when examining student motivation, researchers are looking at what compels a student to learn a second or foreign language. Much research has gone into answering the question: What cognitive and social factors result in an individual initiating, maintaining and sustaining language learning long enough to master the language? Most conceptualizations, theories and approaches to L2 motivation seek to elucidate the psychological and social factors that influence successful language learning.

Although the theories of motivation are in agreement with the nature of motivation, where each theory and model differs is on the mechanism or origins of motivation. Each researcher has a slightly different view of what elements culminate to result in a "motivated student."

According to Dornyei, Gardner based his theory of L2 motivation on extensive empirical research analyzing and assessing the qualities that characterize highly motivated language learners. Motivated language learners possess all or most of the following three traits: a strong will to learn, a desire to learn, and a positive attitude toward learning (as cited in Dornyei, 1998).

Another determining factor in L2 motivation posited by Clement is the degree of the learner's linguistic self-confidence. If a language learner feels competent in communicating in the L2 with low levels of anxiety, he or she will be more motivated to learn the language (cited in Dornyei, 1998).

In addition to self-confidence, self-determination and learner autonomy have been shown to promote intrinsic motivation in L2 learners. Citing several studies on the effects of encouraging students to be proactive learners who take responsibility for their successes and failures in learning, researchers found that autonomous learners were more motivated than learners who passively took instruction and were not proactive in the learning process (Dornyei, 1998).

These ideas of motivation intrigued researchers in the 1990's to create more practical approaches to motivation that could be applied to classroom methodologies. Out of these more pragmatic views of motivation arose several frameworks that attempted to illustrate the mechanisms of motivation with an aim to bridging the gap between SLA research and the language classroom.

Dornyei's extended framework classifies motivation on three levels: the language level, the learner level, and the learning situation. These dimensions are further arranged into sub-levels to describe the different aspects of motivation that are characteristic of each level. Furthermore, Williams and Burden's framework attempts to combine the various concepts of motivation including the cognitive and emotional aspects of motivation featured in the theoretical concepts of motivation posited in the research conducted in the 1970's and 1980's. In this framework, these cognitive and emotional forces lead to a decision to act with an aim to achieve a set goal (as cited in Dornyei, 1998).

Gardner (2007) explains that motivation to learn a second or foreign language and the motivation to learn in a classroom are two distinct types of motivation to be considered when discussing second language acquisition. The distinction lies in the learner's desire to learn a second or foreign language and his or her motivation to engage in certain activities that result in his or her attaining proficiency in the language; in contrast, a learner's classroom learning motivation focuses specifically on the educational context and how the various elements influence a learner's motivation to learn the target language in the classroom. Both types of motivation influence the individual's desire to learn the target language to varying degrees, but both have characteristics that distinguish them from each other. In terms of the classroom learning motivation, the individual's perception of the classroom environment, the teacher, the materials, the facilities and other factors pertaining to a language classroom are considered.

Due to the nature of language learning, Gardner (2007) takes into account the educational situation and the cultural situation. Regarding culture, Gardner looks at the learner's beliefs about his or her own culture and the target culture, as

well as his or her desire to learn about or integrate into the target culture. He argues that the learner's perceptions of his or her educational environment and his or her own culture as well as the L2 culture combine to influence the level of motivation the individual has to engage in language learning tasks in the classroom. In addition to the learner's perceptions of and beliefs about the cultural and educational aspects of language learning, Gardner also considers the learner's attitudes toward those aspects and how they influence the learner's motivation.

Although most approaches to learner motivation offer a psychological perspective, there is at least one motivation model that provides a different view. Schumann and Wood (2004) offer another explanation for the mechanism of motivation from the perspective of neurobiology. They explore the origins of learning motivation from the theory of sustained deep learning (SDL). The authors explain that SDL occurs when the brain learns a skill that is not innately acquired, such as mastering the skills necessary for a certain profession, or learning a second or foreign language as opposed to innate skills, such as recognizing faces and patterns. According to SDL, motivation is a neurological process involving stimulus appraisal based on five aspects: novelty, pleasantness, goal/need significance, coping potential, and self and social image (p. 24).

What sets this concept of motivation apart from the others is its emphasis on the biological and neurological aspects of motivation most notably the role of dopamine and its connection with acetylcholine. When a certain activity or behavior leads to a reward the dopamine levels are enhanced. When dopamine levels are enhanced acetylcholine is released. Acetylcholine aids in strengthening linguistic information. According to Schumann and Wood (2004) this may be how the brain reinforces certain learning behaviors that lead to advanced levels of language proficiency.

Schumann and Wood posit that in the same way that organisms forage for food, learners forage for information. In other words, both are goal oriented activities that depend on the individual remembering which behaviors bring him or her closer to their goal and which do not. If we view learning a language as a goal oriented activity then the behaviors that result in getting closer to or reaching the goal are repeated, whereas those that result in failure are avoided. Successful outcomes result in enhanced dopamine levels, and therefore a positive feeling, while failures result in depressed dopamine levels, which leads to unpleasant feelings and could result in negative attitudes towards the activity or situation (Schumann & Wood, 2004).

When an individual has the desire to acquire a skill or to learn a language, he or she tries different things and the behavior that yields successful results causes the learner to feel positively about that behavior or situation. Neurologically and biologically this is the result of certain areas of the brain and the body responding to the behavior or situation, and where language learning is concerned, it appears that if dopamine levels are enhanced acetylcholine is released and therefore linguistic information is strengthened. Although their hypothesis has not been extensively tested, the effect that writing journals have on students' motivation could be explained by the fact that the activity results in enhanced levels of dopamine. In

addition, the fact the writing journals have been shown to enhance writing performance (Hirose & Sasaki, 2000; Pervin, 2013; Salem, 2007) could be the result of the presence of acetylcholine which reinforces the linguistic information. Of the theories, models, and approaches to learner motivation, Schumann and Wood's (2004) hypothesis that the learner is an information forager offers the most compelling argument for using writing journals as motivational tools in the L2 writing classroom.

Studies on the effect of journaling on motivation

With a clearer idea of motivation and second and foreign language learning, I will look at several studies related to writing journals and their effect on student motivation. These studies usually look at motivation as well as other affective factors, such as writing apprehension, and students' attitudes toward writing. The fact that these studies look at several aspects that influence students' learning behavior shows how complex motivation is. In fact, as demonstrated in the discussion above, attitude is closely related to motivation. It could be argued that a study on motivation could not be done without considering attitude, anxiety, and self-confidence.

Liao and Wong (2010) investigate the effects of dialogue journal writing on students' motivation as well as their fluency, reflection, and anxiety. In terms of motivation, the results were mixed. On the one hand, more than half of the participants responded favorably to dialogue journal writing. However, on one item of the questionnaire regarding motivation specifically, less than half responded favorably.

In his doctoral thesis, Salem (2007), explores writing journals' effect on the written performance, writing apprehension, motivation, and attitudes of Egyptian university students. The results of Salem's study showed that journal writing improved the participants' attitudes toward writing. Motivation was also a component in the attitude questionnaires given in the study. The result of the study showed that students had a positive attitude toward writing journals and that they felt the experience motivated them to write more (Salem, 2007). It was also noted that the participants felt joy and commented on how rewarding it was to write for reasons other than for an exam (Salem, 2007). This suggests that writing journals could be used to motivate students to write more.

In their study on the effects of journal writing, Min and Kim (2005) discovered that the students felt that dialogue journal writing motivated them to learn to write more, and more than half of the participants indicated a desire to continue the activity. There was not much more on the results of motivation; however, as with Salem's study, there is evidence to suggest that journal writing is a positive experience that increases students' motivation to engage in learning writing.

Although there are very few studies on the effect of writing journals on motivation, each study indicates that journal writing might be an effective tool to increase student motivation to write. The pleasure that students experience from keeping writing journals is a common theme among these studies, which were conducted in different educational settings. The fact that journal writing is

perceived as a fun and worthwhile activity for most students could make it an effective motivational tool in writing classes.

CONCLUSION AND AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Based on what is known about learner motivation and the effect of writing journals on most learners, there is a case for using writing journals as a motivational tool in the language classroom. Furthermore, upon review of the studies involving motivation and writing journals, many of the five criteria for stimulus appraisal posited by Schumann and Wood (2004) are met.

In the studies discussed regarding writing journals and their effect on learner motivation and attitudes, the students commented on how enjoyable the journals are. The joy that most students experience when engaging in journaling activities coincides with the pleasure dimension in Schumann and Wood's (2004) five stimulus appraisals. Furthermore, the positive effect that journals have on students' writing performance and self-confidence relate to the learner's self-concept, goal/need significance, as well as coping potential. Moreover, the effects of journal writing also help create a relaxing and fun atmosphere in the classroom. Dialogue journals build a sense of community, and teachers and students form deeper bonds through the messages they share on a weekly basis thereby building a rapport between teachers and their students. Students also choose the journal topics making it an activity that promotes learner autonomy. These features of journal writing indicate a strong possibility that they could be used to increase students' motivation to write in English on a regular and long term basis.

There is certainly a potential for further research. Although the studies explored student motivation, few considered the complex and multifaceted nature of motivation. For example, applying the motivational assessment tools before and after the treatment could illustrate whether or not motivated learners are affected by writing journals. Likewise, a study could investigate whether or not less motivated learners might become more motivated as a result of keeping a writing journal. Examining how learners' motivation changes over time would also be interesting. An investigation into whether or not students continue the activity after the class has ended could also contribute some insight into the long-term effects of journal writing. As there are few studies on writing journals and their effect on student motivation, many avenues can be explored in this area.

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